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BOOK REVIEW

'The House on Fortune Street' by Margot Livesey

Two cohabiting couples, four interlocking narratives and the vicissitudes of love and luck.

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The eponymous London house is not only the locus for the events quotidian and life-altering that take place within its walls but also a nexus for the myriad strings of this uncommonly attractive novel.

At its outset, the story seems deceptively simple: Two young women, close friends since college, occupy its two apartments. Abigail, who owns the house, runs a small theatrical company; Dara, her tenant in a garden flat, is a psychologist at a counseling center. Dara is having a difficult time getting her lover to extricate himself from his former girlfriend and their child and commit himself fully to her. Abigail, though, seems blissfully happy with Sean, having succeeded in luring him away from his marriage and erstwhile soul mate.

Pretty ordinary stuff, you might think -- not exactly unexplored territory. Yet in the hands of Scots-born novelist Margot Livesey, this seemingly mundane story has such substance and freshness that it draws the reader right in. Her style -- vibrant, evocative, irresistible -- has a lot to do with it: "In the silent aftermath Sean couldn't help noticing that his familiar surroundings had taken on a new intensity; the sage-colored walls were more vivid, the stove shone more brightly, the refrigerator purred more insistently, the glasses gleamed. His home here was in danger."

At this point, what endangers Sean's idyll with Abigail is nothing more than a modest overdraft on his bank account. But as the novel gathers steam -- moving back and forth across time, and from London to Scotland and even across the Atlantic -- threats more insidious and perfidious rear up to threaten him and the other characters. Very little in the world of this book is as it first appears to be. So a novel that begins well only gets better as Livesey plumbs and elucidates its depths.

This novelist does not shy away from risk, taking on such hot-button topics as child abandonment and pedophilia, while, to boot, making one of her protagonists a psychologist, a choice that might have led to pat explanation and obvious plotting. That is not the case here; the psychological foundations revealed are never overplayed, never reductive. The truths in this novel are deep, and the conclusions Livesey draws from them are subtle. Her control of her complex plot is manifest throughout.

"The House on Fortune Street" is not all psychology, though. It is, in the best sense of the term, a literary novel: Livesey invokes particular writers and even particular works to add resonance to her characters and their situations. Each of the novel's four sections has its own leitmotif: the poems of the great English Romantic John Keats, the life of Lewis Carroll, Charlotte Brontë's "Jane Eyre" and Dickens' "Great Expectations." Here again, Livesey is supple in her approach. Even if a reader is unfamiliar with those texts, their significance is made perfectly clear. And for the vast majority of her readers, who will indeed know them well, they add a great deal -- all the more so in the hands of a writer as skilled as Livesey.

The thoughts that a chance reference to "Ode to a Nightingale" engender in Sean -- who's writing his doctoral dissertation on Keats -- are both in character and organic to the novel as a whole, root and branch, prefiguring themes and events far beyond Sean's particular ken. He's reading a proposed play script for Abigail's theater: "At the sight of the title, 'Half in Love,' the line rose to his lips: 'Oft-times I have been half in love with easeful death.' And when he turned to the cast list, there were the familiar names: John Keats, Fanny Brawne, Benjamin Bailey. . . . Sean felt a surge of indignation. If anyone was going to write a bad play about his favorite poet, it ought to be he. He had memorized 'To Autumn' when he was sixteen to impress a reluctant girlfriend; almost a decade later Keats had played a crucial role in his meeting with his future wife; and for the last six years, nearly seven, he had gone over and over the poet's brief life as he struggled with his dissertation. Now, alone in the empty flat, he gave in to the memories that had . . . been begging for attention."

At its core, "The House on Fortune Street" is a study of intense relationships: what creates them, what can undo them, what they encompass, what they can alter and what they can't. Livesey probes deep into her characters; her understanding of them is profound and her ability to convey her insights powerful. By the novel's wrenching conclusion, she has succeeded in making you feel that you have been living these characters' lives along with them.

Martin Rubin is a critic and author of "Sarah Gertrude Millin: A South African Life."

The House on Fortune Street
A Novel

Margot Livesey

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